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# THE ENGLISH JOURNAL

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## WANTED: A BUREAU OF DEFINITION<sup>1</sup>

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The National Council of Teachers of English was established as part of the general movement for efficiency, following what is often called the laboratory stage in teaching. The laboratory effort to teach by doing did not at first seem to realize the need of general laboratory equipment, and of measurements, standards, and scales; at least not in English. The efficiency movement, after finding that such things were necessary, that they were rare anywhere in education, and practically non-existent in English, was already endeavoring to supply them before the Council was organized. To do so was found to require minute investigation, exhaustive in scope, and exhausting to all parties concerned, though it is perhaps fair to say that an important difference between investigations in English and in some other fields seems to be that English teachers do not often object to being investigated; that they would commonly rather investigate themselves than be left out.

Up to the present time the general policy of the Council has been indicated by its activities. It endeavored to deal with the present needs of English teaching by attempting, first of all, to determine the basis and the justice of the universal complaint and criticism of the results of that teaching. It found that the English

<sup>1</sup> The president's address before the National Council of Teachers of English, New York City, December 1, 1916.

situation, while acute, is simple. As to its acuteness, the public asserts that pupils learn nothing in English classes; individual teachers complain that no other teacher is apparently doing his share; and some teachers of high rank publish the conclusion that English is a subject that cannot be taught either on its literary side or on its expression side. As to its simplicity, a bit of educational measurement showed that while it is perfectly true as a general statement that no phase of English is being successfully taught, the primary reason is merely that the workmen are too few for the time and the material; and incidentally it also showed that to provide enough workmen would not make the cost of English teaching prohibitive.

But since, besides the number of workmen, their training for their work, their methods, and their tools and equipment are also important, the Council took steps to apply the methods of scientific measurement likewise to these elements. It further proceeded to consider the problems of co-operation, that is, of the duties and responsibilities of an English teacher to other English teachers above and below, to teachers in other subjects, to the school in general, and to the public in general, and also of the duties and responsibilities of others—pupils, teachers, and public—toward him. Almost immediately it was found that before much real progress could be made it was necessary to map out and limit the field to be studied, to organize, systematize, and perfect method and methods so as to avoid duplication, omission, unnecessary friction, and resultant waste.

In no long time it began to appear that a most fundamental part of the training and method in English had been almost wholly ignored; and as a notable result of the discovery an organization has been created with a scope much greater than that of the Council itself, to include eventually every professional, business, and social interest—the American Speech League. But the American Speech League as yet aims to supply but a part, though a basic part, of the general deficiency referred to, although it may, and possibly will, extend its interest to include it all; that fundamental and vital deficiency arising from the fact that it has been assumed from time not recorded that the study of English means only the

study of literature and composition; that is, of the printed or written eye-forms of English; the study of English dead instead of English living. By tradition and precedent the fact is almost universally ignored that English is a living language, a living speech, and that the art of speech and speech interpretation is more important than that of writing; that there can be no mastery of English expression, oral or written, without a knowledge of the language; that there can be no complete interpretation of literature without it; and that the present and future of the language cannot be understood without a knowledge of its past. The consequences of this traditional neglect are that in English many still teach what would be analogous to the statement in geography that the earth is flat and the sun moves around it. Few of us know anything of our elementary speech sounds; many, if not most, are content to teach that *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u* are vowels, although in common speech two of the sounds indicated are always, and the other three almost always, diphthongs. We know almost as little of consonants as of vowels, and perhaps think and speak of *sh* as two consonants and of *x* as one. The manner and mechanism of producing the elementary speech sounds as we understand or misunderstand them are in our teaching left largely to chance. Many of us treat the historical study of the language with contempt, even when we wish to qualify as English teachers, and sometimes when we aspire to direct the pedagogic training of others. Knowing nothing of language as language and of its bearing upon the understanding and interpretation of literature, we carefully "modernize" our editions of English classics, thereby in effect translating them from the author's language into another, and as far as possible removing from them every sign of physical life. The same general cause is responsible for the existence of our non-English or Latin-English, unscientific, illiterate, confusing, and worthless so-called textbooks in grammar. It is further responsible for the fact that we have among our misfortunes, and by no means the least of them, notwithstanding a long, substantially financed, aggressively militant, and at times almost painfully enthusiastic campaign against it, what may very appropriately be called petrified spelling.

One of the activities of the Council endeavors to obtain adequate publicity for the results of work done and yet to be done—a matter of grave difficulty but of utmost importance. Even now the teaching of English would be in a comparatively happy state if all English teachers knew what some know. Some already understand much of the relation of speech sounds and language to teaching. A great many know that English classes of from 125 to 250 pupils are an educational monstrosity, and a number of state authorities have taken action accordingly; but the educational authorities of California were still apparently not informed on this point when last heard from, and some doubt has been expressed regarding those of New York City and possibly of New York state, though the fact may be noted in passing that an English class of 250 in New York City is equivalent to an English class of 500 in localities in which all children are of Anglo-Saxon parentage. Many English teachers know that the first business of so-called composition is to tell something to somebody, but many still rest content with the writing of “themes” into the air. Again, many English teachers know that the first business of reading, from kindergarten through grades, high school, and college, is to interpret the thought and the life of the writer; but ever so many still rest content with developing or trying to develop the ability to pronounce, spell, and define words as the first, if not the only, consideration. To make the knowledge of many the common property of all is a constant and endless struggle in education. Teachers’ meetings and teachers’ periodicals have this as their chief purpose, but teachers’ meetings and periodicals do not reach even the majority of teachers, and they touch the general public scarcely at all. A special publicity endowment might help, but it would not entirely overcome the difficulty, and endowment is sometimes conspicuously unsuccessful in obtaining results. In any event, since endowment is not forthcoming, the Council has to do the best it can through its *Journal* and its publicity committees; but that something is left to be desired is sufficiently evidenced by the fact that California, New York, and probably most of the other states still countenance conditions under which any attempt at the teaching of English must be a pretense. Such

conditions, if indefinitely continued, suggest the possibility that the English language may eventually return to its primeval state and the comma habit trouble us no longer, because it will no longer be necessary to distinguish sentence from sentence, or word from word, or capital from lower case; when the double negative shall return to its own, and *ain't* be regarded no longer with horror, but with respect, perhaps with admiration. It may of course happen that, notwithstanding increased appropriations, better preparation, better methods, and more complete co-operation of teachers, homes, and pupils, the increase in school population will forever keep in advance of our best efforts; but we can fight hopefully as long as we believe that we have a fighting chance; and adequate publicity for established facts and conditions would greatly increase the probability of victory and greatly hasten its coming.

To venture tentative suggestions as to larger policies and further possible activities of the Council is not to assume or imply that it has not already in view enough work to keep it busy forever. One problem suggests or requires the solution of a hundred others; infinite difficulties of method and of administration are to be overcome; the work is often hindered by prejudice, and competent and willing workers are often already otherwise engaged. Shifting conditions extend this infinity still farther; a problem solved will not stay solved, but must again be studied as conditions change; and new problems arise every moment. But if the Council merely continues to operate its present machinery, and machinery and operators do not wear out, it still may find that its product is not meeting the changing demand. According to convention, part of its duty as an efficiency organization should be to anticipate demand and even to create it; and before proceeding farther it may very well undertake to satisfy itself whether that convention is correct and what its own full duty really is. While retaining indefinitely the function and responsibilities assumed in organizing, while continuing to investigate, measure, and standardize, and to revise and repeat its surveys and measurements, it may also rightly and wisely endeavor to find its own basic duty by determining the limits of the general principles and processes involved in what we call efficiency. If efficiency means simply a weighing and measuring

of the physical and material factors in education, then the Council may very well find that efficiency is not the last word in education, or perhaps in anything else. Doubtless it will always be an important word, no matter how tired we may be of hearing it, and doubtless we shall be forever devoted to the connoted ideal; but if its meaning is limited to the making and using of measurements and scales, the Council may very well proceed to transcend those limitations and go on to the consideration of more important things in the effort so to define and stress these further factors in teaching that their place and relation cannot possibly be overlooked. It may happen that to study the meaning of efficiency may be to learn that its full content and implication include all that has been suggested and more; and if so, the Council might make it its own chief business to proclaim this wider meaning of efficiency and to live up to it. This, in substance, is merely to say that before the Council can be confident as to its own duty, responsibility, privilege, or opportunity, it needs first of all to know the meaning of a term, if that meaning can be known.

Immediately it appears that we and everybody else need to know the meaning of numberless other terms—terms that everybody is always using, but so vaguely that two users or uses seldom agree. If the need is great in education, it is as great, if not greater, in general public affairs. Dictionaries cannot meet it, for they are obsolete before they are published; the meanings that we need to know are not in dictionaries, but in the minds of speakers and writers, and change there from day to day. We need something or somebody to keep a historical record of current uses of words, to act as a sort of recording thermometer, indicating all changes of temperature, however minute, and at the same time showing the general course of the weather; something that, without apologies to the Weather Bureau, might perhaps be called a "Bureau of Definition," and that presumably would concern itself with history rather than prophecy; something much bigger than the Council, much more nearly universal than our American Speech League enterprise. As in the case of the Speech League, a considerable part of the work would legitimately and necessarily be ours, for the problems of definition having to do with English

education and its relations are almost infinitely numerous and varied, and the defining of relations is perhaps one of the things most needed. For instance, English teachers are always being asked by everybody else to take "extra" responsibilities, and, of course, they usually accept cheerfully until perhaps the "extra" thing becomes a "regular" thing. It is perfectly natural and perfectly fair that they should be asked, since English lies at the foundation of everything; but when we have ascertained all the relations of everything English to everything not English, both ways, we are likely to find that English teachers may be just as fair and just as cheerful in pointing out responsibilities to others as in accepting them.

Whatever such an agency might be, and by whatever name called, if it exercised its function scientifically and thoroughly, it would have unlimited possibilities of usefulness—and of entertainment also. What a serene joy in being able to cite to a professional wordmonger in education or in politics an authoritative official record of his own past utterances and of the varying and discrepant interpretations thereof, and thus, by confusing him, to prevent him from confusing anyone else. And what an advantage it would be to honest truth seekers in education or outside of education to have a definite means of escaping from their frequent ridiculous or pathetic uncertainty as to what they are talking about, and from resulting unnecessary disputes, distrusts, and ill-feeling; or at least to have a means of knowing definitely where the uncertainty lies. How convenient it would be to have a tribunal to pass upon such matters, for instance, as the popular business and political attitude toward scholarship that a scholar, whatever his specific profession, though a good fellow, has no business or political sense; that he is notable in practical affairs chiefly as a buyer of fake mining stock and a voter for respectable and innocuous figureheads. Our bureau might find all this to be true, but it might find, instead, that while some scholars have been most notable failures in affairs, the percentage of such failures is at most no greater than that of business men or politicians; and if it proved to be a great deal smaller, the fact might sometimes be comforting. It may be noted that the bureau's first step in this



direction would necessarily be to undertake to define what is meant by "scholar" and what by "business man" or "man of affairs." As to method of procedure and of announcing results, my proposed bureau might consider as a possible model the action of the American Association of University Professors on such questions as have thus far come before them. The method is that of applied logic after complete investigation, absolutely scientific, impartial, and convincing, concerning itself simply to throw light on facts and the meaning of terms used by those who discuss those facts, stating facts as facts, and inferences only as inferences, if at all.

As to the usefulness of such an agency, or at least of the work that it might find to do, it is not necessary to multiply illustrations. A little while ago all newspapers and public speakers were discussing, more or less heatedly, militarism, pacificism, preparedness, Americanism, but entirely without agreement as to the significance of any of those terms. More recently we have been quarreling about what arbitration is; and one can dispute with anybody at any time the meaning of such time-honored words as socialism and democracy. In education practically every term and idea that we have occasion to use is equally in need of definition. What do East and West signify in education? What is the essential distinction, if any, between secular and denominational education? Just what do we think we mean by mental discipline, by motivation, by vocational guidance? Still more commonplace, what is grammar, and what, consequently, is its place in teaching? For that matter what is a sentence? If by tradition we assume that a sentence is the expression of a thought, what is a thought? What is meant by "correct" spelling? What does education itself mean? If the aim of education is training to think, what, then, is thinking? Indeed, if we should ever have a bureau of definition, it would clearly have to begin operations by defining itself and by defining definition.

It may safely be assumed that not all the desirable activities of such an agency would at first meet with a cordial reception, though, of course, that should not discourage a philanthropic undertaking; and in at least one instance the past experience of

the Council itself has shown that facts accurately arrived at and dispassionately stated may ultimately be accepted by the parties chiefly concerned—in that instance certain newspapers—even when uncomfortable and a trifle uncomplimentary. These activities should greatly advance the social good, it is true; but society in general never seems anxious to be uplifted, and it is obvious that our bureau would have to prove itself before it could expect a welcome. One could only conjecture how it might deal with any particular situation, as, for instance, the dispute between the so-called cultural and the so-called practical in education, or the still more conventional and more painful one between the so-called religious and the so-called secular in education. But if a bureau could act upon such matters as these, that action might result, not only in making the adjective “so-called” forever unnecessary, but it might and probably would show that there is not and never has been the slightest occasion for any misunderstanding; that the contending parties are absolutely at one in all their final aims and ideals.

The first of these, the contention between the cultural or aesthetic, and the practical or utilitarian, however tired we may be of hearing about it, concerns us nearly, because it divides English against itself. For the moment the pendulum seems to be swinging hard in the direction of the practical under its new name of the vocational. In this dispute the familiar assumptions are that cultural training shows how to live while the practical or utilitarian finds the means; the one earns the money, the other uses it. Clearly one must earn a living before one can enjoy it—a fact ignored by traditional education rather too long for its own present comfort—and the average citizen is ready to say that he does not need any instruction as to what to do with his money after he earns it. Though without training he is quite likely to use it to his own detriment as well as to that of others, such a real and grave danger to society is hardly to be met by saying to the average citizen, “You should be cultured, and thus enter into a superior station where you may enjoy life more than you now do.” He will probably interpret this as an assertion of cultured superiority on the part of his adviser, and phrase an uncultured

reply ending with the word "high-brow," preceded with adjectives oftener heard than seen; and the fact that, until our bureau is established, neither party to the controversy presumably can know what a high-brow is supposed to be, does not mend the matter.

As to this particular controversy, the actual fact may be that all subjects are at the same time both cultural and utilitarian, and that if both values are extracted, as in the interest of economy and efficiency they should be, there need be no further quarrel; either class may serve the double purpose, though for economic balance both should be included. It is easy enough to illustrate the cultural value of so-called utilitarian studies; evidently one may learn how to build a bridge, paint a house, or serve a meal so as to delight the eye and refresh the spirit without in the least diminishing the usefulness of the product; but the practical value of so-called cultural subjects, such as music, painting, or our own English literature, is not so immediately evident. If to be practical simply means to increase earning power, then the utilitarian value of music must exist chiefly for those who teach or practice it as a profession. Once more we must have recourse to definition, that is, to the process which may perhaps some day be defined as definition.

First, what is a practical training? Does it concern itself chiefly with the hands or the head? Our bureau might decide that a practical training educates the head to direct the hands and all other agencies at the will of the individual; that a practical training is that which teaches a man to be master of his mind and to make the mind master of circumstances; that is, it is the training which teaches a man to think—effectively.

Then, what is thinking? While always asserting that its object was to train the mind, traditional education has concerned itself chiefly with training, or attempting to train, merely the memory, as if no other mental activity deserved attention; and even the more recent and supposedly more practical stage in education, known as the laboratory stage, made use of physical activities largely to the same end of strengthening the memory. Now in the present efficiency stage of educational progress we are

paying much attention to the faculty of observation; but while this also is certainly important among the thinking processes, it does not exhaust them. True, observation supplies the foundation upon which memory and all other mental activities must build; but it is also true that, no matter how completely and accurately trained, observation and memory without other aid will not suffice to give men the mastery of self and circumstance; that observation and memory do not include the most important and essential—the most utilitarian—part of thinking.

One who simply observes and remembers, however accurately, how things have been done, and continues to do them in the same identical fashion, comes in no long time to failure, for the reason that past conditions are never repeated. New experiences present themselves, new problems develop, new means must be devised for meeting and satisfying them; observation plays its part in taking note of the new conditions and experiences, but memory is helpless in dealing with them, for they are outside its province. The mind, observing and analyzing new phenomena, notes resemblances and analogies, and, remembering how previous phenomena were dealt with and what were the results, proceeds to determine within itself that some new and different course of action or some readjustment or modification of a remembered action applied to new phenomena will lead to new and more excellent results. Here, then, is a faculty which may be trained, disciplined, to be the adequate means of so dealing with new elements in experience, and of dealing so differently with such elements as may chance to recur, that the results are not only different, but better, or at least in more nearly complete accord with the will of the individual. It is this faculty, and only this, which makes a man master of his circumstances, and is therefore the final, central, and practical part of thinking. It cannot operate without present material furnished by observation and past material furnished by memory; but on the basis of these it proceeds to determine how to shape the future to its own will, first conceiving a future new because of different and more ideal conditions, and then, in the light of past conditions, so dealing with present ones that the new conception of the future shall become a reality. Evidently this faculty is the

imagination—the imagination disciplined, restrained, controlled. The exercise of that control we call reason; but the vital creative force or component, the element without which there is no life or possibility of growth in what we call thinking, is the imagination.

But since this vital activity in our thinking deals with the material of experience, observed and remembered, it next becomes necessary to find out what experience is. Briefly, one may say that experience includes whatever is in a human consciousness, whether entering at first-hand through intuition or the senses, or at second-hand as matter communicated from others; that it includes volitional, emotional, and imaginative, as well as physical, aspects, and whatever is remembered as well as whatever is perceived. Then, for the most complete development of vital imaginative thinking, it is of advantage that experience, the content of consciousness, shall be as broad as it can be made. If so, then at once it may be seen why the so-called cultural subjects, whatever they are—literature, art, music, history, philosophy—are practical. Subjects which are commonly called practical tend to confine one within the limits of the physical part of experience; training the imagination, if they train it at all, to deal primarily with sense material and to provide primarily for the fuller satisfaction of physical appetite, the degree of satisfaction probably measured in terms of money and—not idleness—leisure. The imagination cannot provide for the enjoyment of that leisure in terms of anything save experience. But the measure of our experience, of the content of our consciousness, is of course not limited to that part of it which comes to us through our physical senses. All that ever has been communicated to mankind since the creation by the written or the spoken word, or otherwise, may also be made a part of our experience, to be as freely woven into our willed future as any other part, to enrich that future immeasurably. Since the cultural study broadens our experience by bringing into it the best and rarest things that have ever been in human consciousness, and thus makes our thinking more complete, since it thereby increases our capacity for self-realization, enjoyment, and usefulness, it is in the highest degree practical.

If all this is true, the essential difference between the so-called practical and the so-called cultural in education is a difference in degree only; the aim of each is to train all the powers of the mind, and by that control of these which we call reason, to direct all toward the mastery and betterment of future conditions. The practical course may be as cultural as any culture course and the culture course as practical as any practical course; the difference is that what we call culture is a broadening and deepening of the power of thought by broadening and enriching the experience with which it must deal. So if a practical course neglects the cultural part of its province, as it commonly does, and if the culture course neglects the practical, either without the other leaves the mind to that extent deformed, crippled, undeveloped; hence arises the economic need of keeping them together in education for completeness of training and full development of power.

Since at first we can build on our own experience only, and are alive only to a small part of that until the observation has been trained, we presumably always shall find it well to begin our training with studies of more practical type; but still we are likely to require a so-called cultural study to bring from our subconsciousness the cognition of the largest and finest part of our own personal experience without regard to the further wealth that comes from sources outside ourselves. Hence, though what we call cultural studies are under present conditions of training far more necessary in education than they may be in time to come, they always will be necessary in order to secure the broadest experience, the most complete usefulness, and therefore the fullest life, to the individual mind.

So our bureau might give its heartiest indorsement to manual training, domestic art, and every vocational study, and recommend all for the fullest credit in college or elsewhere, but at the same time require with equal emphasis that every such study must be so directed as to train the imagination, and to train it on all sides, and then insist on such further complementary training for the imagination as may be necessary or desirable; such training as history, literature, and art may provide. Then, having thus or otherwise ended one long-standing feud—and in the course of

time a great many others—our bureau might eventually dare to study the basis of the time-honored quarrel between so-called religious and so-called secular or scientific education. Each usually assumes that the other is altogether and hopelessly wrong in its influence upon the mind or the spirit, as the case may be, as though the intellectual and the spiritual were distinct and irreconcilable. Here again our bureau might undertake to find what essentially is meant by the intellectual and the spiritual, the religious and the scientific. If, as has been intimated, the end of secular education is to enlarge one's capacity for shaping the future according to one's will, and to train the will to strive toward a future better than the past, then there is no stage in the process anywhere which teaches the individual that his activities and energies terminate in himself. To earn money one must perform service; in spending it one must seek to please and satisfy others. Our food and clothing, our houses, our occupations, and recreations are adjusted for the approval of others; even the foolishness of fashion has a worthy social motive underlying it. Such education, then, if true to its purpose, must make it clear that the individual can reach his best only through seeking the best for all; that nothing can be an individual good unless it is also a social good. The true end of secular education, therefore, is social service. But the end of religion, of Christianity, the central teaching of the founder of Christianity, is the same: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto Me." If religious and secular education are each seeking the highest good of humanity, why should not a clear definition of the ultimate purpose of each end their quarrel?

While these illustrations do not concern the Council as closely as they might, numberless problems lie within the field of English education which might be approached in some such way; and while the Council assuredly is already well supplied with work, I believe that it should broaden its activity and influence to the very limit. I should like to have the Council a perennial illustration of what it means to think, and I should like to have it everlastingly insist that everybody else shall think also. When it has taken thought and has decided what action is right, I should like to have it act.

I should like to see it one of the best balanced, the most influential, the most energetic, accurate, unselfish organizations on the face of the earth. I wish that it might be a constant source of uneasiness to all wilful or careless educational sinners and a constant source of help to the uninformed both within its own proper field and outside of it. I believe that it is our privilege and our right as an English organization to do a considerable amount of thinking for others as well as for ourselves, since English is a center and foundation of all things. I believe that we should accept every responsibility and every opportunity that comes to us and use it; that our vision should span the educational universe; that we should be forever doing the things that ought to be done without waiting to be asked and without expecting to be thanked; and I should like to include among our policies and ideals that sort of usefulness which I have been describing, and to have the Council itself become or establish something analogous to my imaginary bureau of definition.